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Introduction – Feeding the Civic Imagination

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ABSTRACT Food is a powerful entry point into the civic imagination—i.e., the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions, the social process of which fosters a shared vision for collective action. As an essential material component of human life, food exists as an extremely mundane and dynamic aspect of our everyday personal and social experiences; our relationship with food is intertwined with issues of privilege, access, representation, language, ethnicity, and the materiality of culture. This forum explores diverse intersections between food and civic imagination, with topics ranging from shared memories, local (re-)imaginations, history and civic action, and private-public translations. The forum discusses how food sustains, nourishes, and connects individuals and their communities by delving into both their presence—e.g., acquiring and preparing ingredients, cooking meals, sharing or selling foods—and absence—e.g., hunger and human waste in food ecology. Articles in this collection demonstrate that the civic imagination is not only fed in dining rooms and kitchens but also in less conventionally thought-of contexts, such as digital spaces, toilets, and forums such as ours. They urge us to engage with food in new imaginative ways, fostering and bridging conversations: one cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like, and one must explore together to navigate and actualize the imaginative possibilities.

KEYWORDS civic engagement, civic imagination, food

The story of this forum begins in mid-March 2020, when we, like many others, experienced our first COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown. As members of Civic Paths,[1] a research group based at the University of Southern California, we had to move all our meetings and work online overnight. Even as we struggled as scholars, practitioners, and humans, we also sought out our meetings as a space

where we could just be together and share what we were experiencing in our bodies, the losses we lived with, and what we needed to do to cope day-to-day. In short, we felt a need to connect with each other. We soon noticed that many of our conversations revolved around food—baking it, eating it, sharing it, missing it, and, at times, dreaming about it. This was so much so that we decided to end the year with a (then virtual) remixing stories activity that centered food, recipes, and memory. We invited others to join us as we came together to share memory-filled ingredients and create new recipes for imagined guests. We also committed to a more sustained focus on food in our work, an agreement that ultimately charted the path to this forum, which was edited by a team within Civic Paths.

Based at the University of Southern California and founded in 2009, our research group focuses on the continuities between participatory cultures and civic engagement with a commitment to understanding how the process of collective imagining allows us to tap the *civic imagination*. In our work, we define civic imagination as the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political, or economic conditions; one cannot change the world unless one can imagine what a better world might look like.[2] An essential element of civic imagination is the individual's ability to understand themselves as civic agents capable of enacting change. However, civic imagination must also be explored with others; one must gain respect and understanding for the perspectives of others and ultimately navigate imaginative possibilities with the communities one comes from or chooses to belong to. Civic imagination is a social, rather than individual, process from which emerges a shared vision that we act together to achieve. Civic imagination is a way to express desires for liberation or equity that may not be fully realized yet; it is also a framework to guide the process of such radical change. Like Paulo Freire we believe that "imagination is not an exercise for those detached from reality, those who live in the air. On the contrary, when we imagine something, we do it necessarily conditioned by a lack in our concrete reality."[3] In other words, civic imagination helps us access and understand a key

generative dimension of social change, bringing visioning and creativity to the challenging issues we face.[4]

We see our work on civic imagination in dialogue with several theoretical and applied socially oriented approaches that center the imagination. Stephen Duncombe's work on "open utopias" has been particularly helpful in helping us articulate the important role that charting paths that matter even if the end goal is beyond our reach.[5] Similarly, Mary Warnock's work on the imagination as a mechanism that helps us "think of certain objects in the world in a new way: as signifying something else."[6] As such, we see ourselves as working in conversation with thinkers who center the imagination in social justice efforts, including those working on the pragmatic imagination,[7] the radical imagination,[8] and significantly the rich insights generated by those engaged with Afrofuturism.[9] We see the civic imagination as a concept that supports a clearer articulation of how shared cultural practices connect to a collective process of imagining that bumps up against and renders visible existing constraints.

Our understanding of food as a powerful entry point into the civic imagination is also deeply rooted in cultural studies where food is intertwined with issues of privilege, access, representation, language, ethnicity, and the materiality of culture. Food is also a part of our intellectual experience as our relationship to food is shaped by the meanings we bestow upon it. Whether it is appropriated or interpreted across multiple regions and cultures, food also plays a role in understanding and contesting culture. In this forum, we bring together concrete food-centered examples that surface tangible and imagined meanings. Food can nourish and inspire us. Food can be used to shame us.[10] Food can connect us to each other. Food can divide us. Food can remind us of the past. It can also inspire us to think about the future and to imagine culinary possibilities, even as we encounter real-world constraints, tensions, and challenges. Often food does all of this at the same time. We think of imagination as a force with power, and collective imaginations as civic arenas where serious issues can be explored,

critiqued, and aspirational futures can be crafted through, among other things, eating, cooking, and baking.

Whether it is cooking a recipe passed down over generations, fighting food injustice, interrogating authenticity,[11] valuing the fleeting experience of a shared meal, relearning how we relate to what we eat, exploring a flavor combination learned over YouTube, or deepening the connections we make by sharing our bakes on social media in the midst of a pandemic lockdown, food has the power to connect, challenge, and inspire us. As such, we see ourselves in dialogue with other publications that have emerged in this space including the "Food, Popular Culture, and the COVID-19 Pandemic" special issue of the Popular Culture Studies Journal published in 2022.[12] With mindfulness towards how food has historically often been used in framing racist, gendered, ableist, fatphobic, heteropatriarchal, colonialist, and ethnonationalist imaginings of civic participation,[13] we want to understand how collective energies and shared emotions in relation to food to pave the way for tangible social change. It is not about choosing one food item over another. It is about reaffirming and challenging our beliefs in the power of food to protect our rights and fight for justice. It is about charting paths through the creative, ambivalent, or painful ways that food shows up in our lives. As such, we believe that exploring the intersection between food and the civic imagination makes a valuable contribution to the fast-growing field of food and culture, in which "food links body and soul, self, and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic."[14]

This forum is intended to be an invitation for further conversation that considers how we might approach, parse, and further interrogate the intersection of food and civic imagination.

As such, it brings together short articles that discuss diverse intersections between food and civic imagination, with topics ranging from shared memories, glocal (re-)imaginations, history and civic action, and private-public translations.

The range of topics covered is intentionally broad and multifaceted so as to reveal and engage points of entry for further future explorations of this rich topic. As an essential material component of human life, food exists as an extremely mundane and dynamic aspect of our everyday personal and social experiences; it sustains, nourishes, and connects individuals and their communities. In organizing this forum, we hoped to "feed" the readers' civic imagination by conversing with articles that touch on various food practices within and across borders. This includes not simply those that discuss the act of eating, but also those that engage with acquiring and preparing ingredients, cooking meals, sharing or selling foods, and even their absence—i.e., hunger and how human waste relates to their ecology.[15]

In this way, this forum embodies an important ethos of cultural studies: "culture is ordinary."[16] The forum inspires "ordinary" food-related traditions and practices to be explored as what are entangled with the socio-material conditions of particular groups,[17] and therefore both as the sites of "struggle[s] for and against a culture of the powerful" and "the stake to be won and lost" during it,[18] captured through civic imagination.[19] This aim is reflected in the style of this forum's essays. The essays in this forum are intellectually rich and draw on diverse interdisciplinary literature such as food studies and cultural anthropology.[20] We connect these explorations with civic imagination and cultural studies' attention to the everyday through integrating personal narrative with cultural analysis. We encouraged the contributors to be imaginative with their writing as well, and the forum includes academic essays, educational modules, recipes, microhistories, and personal recollections that delve into the connections between civic imagination and food through a combination of theory and poetry. As a result, the forum serves various insightful and "delectable" essays for the readers to create their own version of a multi-course meal. Pushing the food metaphor further, we also complemented these articles with three Feeding the Civic Imagination blog conversations on intercultural food < http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/8/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-one-elaine-almeida-and-lisa-silvestri> , digital media and food <

http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/17/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-two-brienne-flemming-and-ioana-mische> , and the Great British Bake Off < http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/17/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-three-the-great-british-bake-off> that were published earlier in 2022 and can be found at *Pop Junctions*.[21] The range of the topics in the forum unsettles the ordinariness of food's deep, broad integration into our everyday lives, as well as provokes the question of "whose everyday life?" in navigating it.[22] This, in turn, urges the question of "whose civic imagination, and for whom?" The lens of civic imagination involves identifying the locus, reach, and consequences of collective imagination and/or strategizing through such an identification, instead of merely detecting the presence of an imaginative component in "ordinary" food practices. As such, the articles included in this collection make a collective statement about the complex role that imagining, particularly an experiential imagining, can play in the further conceptualization of a dynamic and multilayered, and even contradictory, civic imagination rooted in shared cultural practices.

Several of the articles in this collection explore cooking as it encourages us to (re-)imagine the present through our past personal and historical memories, with the sensorial experiences that can nourish our future selves. As Luce Giard wrote, "doing-cooking is the medium for a basic, humble, and persistent practice that is repeated in time and space, rooted in the fabric of relationships to others and to one's self, marked by the 'family saga' and the history of each, bound to childhood memory just like rhythms and seasons."[23] In that vein, Jana Stöxen's "Passing Down and Following up: Jewish Cuisine's Umbrella Potential" published through *Pop Junctions* discusses how collective culture can be imagined and maintained without a clear, explicit structure through the example of Jewish cuisine.[24] The case study traces religious and cultural belonging through local variations of Jewish cuisine, focusing on how cultural heritage can function as symbolic resources for cooperative, inclusive exchange around identities and civic participation. Sulafa Zidani and Paulina Lanz's contribution, "A Pinch of Imagination," < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/a-

pinch-of-imagination-lanz-zidani/> demonstrates how collaborative imagination can be achieved in practice through a recipe that traverses both authors' cultural, ethnic backgrounds—Palestinian and Mexican, respectively—and personal, familial memories. The reader is invited to join in by sharing their own recipes, building memories, and communicating with meaning. As the authors observe, "An appreciation for the practices and historical significance is another act of civic engagement and imagining otherwise. Imagination can pass along these memories and cultural expressions".

Yet, as Giard also noted, intimate food-related knowledge has also been culturally rendered as belonging to private, female spheres despite the multiple skills and creativity cooking requires.[25] Kris Chi's article, "From Housewives to Homemakers: Civic Engagement, Imagination, and Déjà Vu in Taiwan," < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/from-housewives-to-homemakers-civic-engagement-imagination-taiwan-chi/> tells the Story of Civic Engagement in Food in Taiwan" explores the history of Homemakers United Foundation (HUF) to surface how Taiwanese housewives' civic imagination was connected to their interest in healthy eating and environmentally friendly consumption. Chi explains how the members claimed their "ordinary mother" identity to encourage more women to participate in social issues. The article urges readers to look beyond the public-private dichotomy and the tendency to disassociate civics from the private sphere.

Food is associated with absence, just as much as it is with abundance, and utopian visions can cast long shadows that obscure inequities, prejudice, and lack, situations that summon the counter-imagination and provoke us to ask "what else" and "how else" as we engage our creativity.[26] Erica Leigh's "'Cooking in Someone Else's Kitchen': Exploring Food as a Commonplace for Antiracist Pedagogy, White Allyship, and Feeding Civic Imagination" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/cooking-in-someone-elses-kitchen-food-antiracist-pedagogy-white-allyship-leigh/> is a practice-

centric contribution that proposes a social justice-motivated curriculum for educators, particularly white educators who want to reflect on their positionality and encourage intersectional, historically rooted anti-racist discussions in their classrooms. The article includes detailed examples of materials, assignments, and lesson goals to help educators and allies bring this approach into classrooms. Offering a personal perspective, B.L. Jefferson's "They Broke Bread with Sincere Hearts: Imagining New Gymnastics Cultures" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/they-broke-bread-with-sincere-hearts-imagining-new-gymnastics-cultures-ellerbe/> reflects on the author's embodied experiences as a professional gymnast who dealt with restrictive food practices in high-pressure competitive athlete culture. The author also shares subversive practices aimed at warding off hunger, providing a rare insight into everyday experiences of gymnasts. Told by a gymnast-scholar, the article highlights an empowering community strategy to reclaim agency over one's body within a situation of abuse and exploitation. Jefferson uses the "breaking bread" metaphor and argues for centering collective imaginative practices around everyday symbols to imagine alternatives and foster cultures of care. She states, "Breaking bread can be viewed as an act of solidarity and a breaking down of existing power structures within the sport in an effort to imagine more loving and safer gymnastics cultures."

The civic imagination is not fed only in dining rooms and kitchens. It can also flourish in other less conventionally thought-of contexts, such as digital spaces and toilets. Jennifer Shutek's "Holy Wine Online: Deir Cremisan in Digital Space" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/holy-wine-online-deir-cremisan-digital-space-shutek/> focuses on the Deir Cremisan Facebook page as a civic imagination site, stressing that its positioning as an "apolitical" place helps involved communities—including the Indigenous makers, local workers, supportive customers, and interested international parties—connect around Palestinian solidarity both materially and discursively. The article draws on the author's ethnographic research to demonstrate how the Facebook page

administrators facilitate the civic imagination through what may, at first glance, seem to be an apolitical space. As Shutek comments, it is a place "that avoids overtly political digital activism to creatively resist Israeli structures of occupation, imagining a winery that does not live in the shadows of a separation barrier." Pushing our thinking about how the civic imagination applies to the food cycle, Daren Shi-chi Leung's piece "Shit in Our Time: An Unsettling Epoch of Metabolic Disturbance" < https://csalateral.org/forum/feeding-the-civic-imagination/shit-in-our-time-metabolic-disturbance-leung/> describes the metabolic intimacy between humans and soil by positioning the sociotechnical system of (re-)processing "humanure" in the cyclical ecology of food and waste. In this piece, Leung draws on the history of socialist Chinese toilet system to connect diverse actors that represent the network of the food system, including those that capture rural-urban and human-nonhuman dynamics. Microhistories of Leung's family members who worked as "humanure" laborers and were constituents of the larger ecology surrounding this practice urge us to listen to diverse human and non-human actors that share our space.

Read together, the articles included in this forum expand our understanding of the intersection of food and civic imagination. This cultural studies and civic imagination project encourages the readers to trace the dynamic relations hidden beneath the seeming ordinariness of food practices and to collectively imagine the ways that these relations can be analyzed and restructured. They engage historical accumulations, personal experiences, and creative impulses that traverse social, embodied, and economic boundaries. As such, we believe they make a meaningful contribution to the cultural studies field at a time when there is, as Jonathan Gross reminds us, "much to be gained from developing new ways of creatively extending temporal horizons: imagining possible, plausible, probable and preferred futures, and reactivating multiple pasts."[27] From manure to hunger, from cooking to civic action, from nostalgic to glocal (re-)imaginations, and from recipes to pedagogies, this forum invites readers to engage in the complex relationships between food, culture, and human and non-human actors, thereby

charting new epistemologies. As this forum evidences, food-inspired imagination also fosters conversation, and each article calls on us to engage with food in new imaginative ways. And, in the words of Maxine Greene, we recognize that the imagination is what allows us to "look beyond the boundary where the backyard ends or the road narrows, diminishing out of sight."[28] With the ecological, political, social, and other crises we currently face, we need to push these boundaries now, more than ever.

Notes

1. The Civic Paths Editorial Team consists of Do Own (Donna) Kim, Paulina Lanz, Sangita Shresthova, Isabel Delano, Molly Frizzell, Amanda Lee, Khaliah Reed, Becky Pham, Steve Proudfoot, Javier Rivera, and Essence Lynn Wilson. ↩

2. Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (New York: NYU Press, 2020). ↩

3. Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (London: Routledge, 2005), 94. ↩

4. Isabel Delano, Mehitabel Glenhaber, Do Own (Donna) Kim, Paulina Lanz, Ioana Mischie, Tyler Quick, Khaliah Peterson-Reed, et al., "Flying Cars and Bigots: Projecting Post-COVID-19 Worlds through the Atlas of the Civic Imagination as Refuge for Hope," *Continuum* 36, no. 2 (2022): 169–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2021.2003303 < https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2021.2003303> . ↩

5. Stephen Duncombe, "Introduction: Open Utopia," *OpenUtopia* (blog), 2012, https://theopenutopia.org/full-text/introduction-open-utopia/ < https://theopenutopia.org/full-text/introduction-open-utopia/> . ↩

6. Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 197. ↩

7. Anne Pendleton-Jullian and John Seely Brown, *Pragmatic Imagination: Single from Design Unbound* (San Jose: Blurb, 2016). ↩

8. Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish, *The Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2014). ↩

9. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013). ↩

10. Carole Counihan, “Memories, Meals, and Shame in Florence, Italy,” in *Food in Memory and Imagination: Space, Place and, Taste*, ed. Beth Forrest and Greg de St Maurice (Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 149–61.

11. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, “Diana Kennedy, Rick Bayless and the Imagination of ‘Authentic’ Mexican Food,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 97, no. 4 (April 20, 2020): 567–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2020.1699330 < https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2020.1699330> .

12. Schuwerk and Parody, “Food, Popular Culture, and the Covid-19 Pandemic Special Issue.”

13. Tara J. Schuwerk and Jessica M. Parody. “Food, Popular Culture, and the Covid-19 Pandemic Special Issue.” *Popular Culture Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2022): 4–7.

14. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, “Why Food? Why Culture? Why Now? Introduction to the Third Edition,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

15. Lisa Pine, “Food Memory and Food Imagination at Auschwitz,” in *Food in Memory and Imagination: Space, Place and, Taste*, ed. Beth Forrest and Greg de St. Maurice (Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 109–22.

16. Raymond Williams, “Culture Is Ordinary,” in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 91–100.

17. Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed John Storey, 4th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2006), 514.

18. Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 518.

19. Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova, *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination*.

20. Janet Chrzan and John Brett, eds., *Food Culture: Anthropology, Linguistics and Food Studies*, 1st ed., vol. 2 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019); Jakob A. Klein and James L. Watson, eds., *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); David E. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (New York: Berg Publishers, 2001).

21. Elaine Almeida and Lisa Silvestri, “Feeding the Civic Imagination (Part One): Intercultural Food,” *Pop Junctions: Reflections on Entertainment, Pop Culture, Activism, Media Literacy, Fandom and More*, May 18, 2022, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/8/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-one-elaine-almeida-and-lisa-silvestri < http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/8/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-one-elaine-almeida-and-lisa-silvestri> ; Brienna Fleming and Ioana Mischie, “Feeding the Civic Imagination (Part Two): Digital Media and Food,” Pop Junctions: Reflections on Entertainment, Pop Culture, Activism, Media Literacy, Fandom and More, May 23, 2022, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2022/5/17/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-two-brienne-flemming-and-ioana-mische <

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22. Ben Highmore, "Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life," in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ben Highmore, 1st ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 1.

23. Luce Giard, "Part II: Doing-Cooking," in *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 2: Living and Cooking*, by Michel De Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1998), 157.

24. Jana Stöxen, "Feeding the Civic Imagination (Part Four): Passing Down and Following Up: Jewish Cuisine's Umbrella Potential," Pop Junctions: Reflections on Entertainment, Pop Culture, Activism, Media Literacy, Fandom and More, Jan 15, 2024, https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2024/1/7/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-four-passing-down-and-following-up-jewish-cuisines-umbrella-potential < https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2024/1/7/feeding-the-civic-imagination-part-four-passing-down-and-following-up-jewish-cuisines-umbrella-potential> .

25. Giard, "Part II."

26. Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "Popular Imagination and Identity Politics: Reading the Future in Star Trek: The Next Generation," *Western Journal of Communication* 65, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 392–415, https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374718 < https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374718> .

27. Jonathan Gross, "Hope against Hope: COVID-19 and the Space for Political Imagination," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 454, https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211004594 < https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211004594> .

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Article details

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